DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 613 JC 000 552

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TITLE Selected Policy Issues Facing the 21st Century Community College.
PUB DATE 2000-07-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Alabama Community College Leadership Academy (Tuscaloosa, AL, July 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Administration; College Role; *Community Colleges; Developmental Studies Programs; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; Job Skills; *Labor Force Development; *Remedial Instruction; Transfer Policy; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses some policy issues facing community colleges in the 21st century: remedial education, K-16 initiatives, and workforce preparation. Identifying social needs and then determining appropriate policies to address them happens within an historical and cultural context. Within our capitalistic and democratic society, four cultural or social values dominate in determining educational policy: choice, quality, efficiency, and equity. Realizing that these values sometimes conflict with one another will help community college leaders better understand why some policies arouse so much controversy. The provision of remedial education at the college level results from the two social values of equity (access) and quality (excellence), two values that are often seen as "mutually exclusive." Policies regarding K-16 initiatives reflect the cultural values of efficiency (easing the transition from high school to college and quality concerns over the rigor of dual enrollment courses). The primary social value behind legislation that allows for two-year colleges to be providers of short-term workforce training designed to result in a job is efficiency or the desire to "reduce duplication and expenditures for operating workforce development programs and services." As much as this kind of legislation benefits two-year colleges financially, there is some risk that the legislation will indirectly lead to an undermining of the community college's transfer mission because of a preponderance of short-term training programs. (Contains 12 references.) (JA)

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By Barbara K. Townsend

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Selected Policy Issues Facing the 21st Century Community College[1]

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My topic tonight is "Selected Policy Issues Facing the 21st Century Community College." There are a lot of policies that affect what happens in community colleges—what happens to the students, what happens to the faculty, what happens to the administrators and staff, and thus what happens to the colleges itself. Tonight I will discuss some specific policies affecting community colleges, but I will do so in terms of the cultural or social values that are embedded in them. I focus on the values undergirding these policies as a way of enhancing your "contextual competence" (Townsend & Bassoppo-Moyo, 1997) or understanding of the societal context within which policies develop. If you understand this context, you can better understand why some policies arouse so much controversy, and you may make your next policy decisions with more forethought and caution.

What Are Policies?

Policies are "rules" or "guidelines" developed as specific solutions to something that has been designated as a social problem or need. For example, there is a need for America to have many workers trained beyond the high school level (Problem 1), so a college education becomes necessary for many people. However, since some cannot afford to go to college (Problem 2), the federal and state governments have developed financial aid policies (Solution) to assist them and help meet the country's need for trained workers .

The Importance of Context

Identifying social problems or needs and then determining appropriate solutions or policies to address them happens within an historical and cultural context. To understand educational policies in the United States, we must be aware that capitalism and democracy are "fundamental shapers" (Twombly & Townsend, in press) of the context in which these problems and solutions are defined. For example, capitalism requires that schooling be used for workforce development. We see this from the beginning of American education, when Harvard was established to prepare leaders for the new country. As regards the two-year college, both federal and state governments have viewed this institution as an important means for workforce development. This perspective has been reflected in the development of workforce policies such as the recent Workforce Investment Act.

Cultural Values Dominating Policy Decisions

Within our capitalistic and democratic society, four cultural or social values dominate in determinations of educational policy: choice, quality, efficiency, and equity (Marshall, Frederick, & Wirt, 1989).

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[1] This paper was presented at the Alabama Community College Leadership Academy held in Tuscaloosa, AL, in July 2000.

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1. ***Choice*** is the freedom to choose. Institutional freedom to choose what courses, programs, and degrees will be offered is restricted through state policies that specify which institutions can offer certain courses, programs and degrees. Students desire the freedom to choose what college to attend and in what program to enroll. Government support of student institutional choice is manifested through the development of student aid policies. However, student choice in programs is sometimes restricted because of the next social value.

2. The value of ***Quality*** or excellence in educational programs manifests itself in such policies as selective institutional and programmatic admissions (which serve to deny some students their choice of school and/or program), performance funding, merit-pay, and post-tenure review.

3. ***Efficiency*** or the belief in "regulating school operations in ways intended to keep costs down and order [and productivity] up" (p. 91) is manifested in the current emphasis on K-16 system building, including dual credit/enrollment, School-to-Work programs, and transfer and articulation policies; the movement in some states to make community colleges the sole or main provider of remedial education; enrollment-based funding formulas; and the use of part-time faculty.

4. ***Equity*** from an educational perspective is defined as the belief that we should all have access to equivalent educational opportunities. Student aid policies are partially based in a concern for equity. Policies prohibiting discrimination in admissions because of race, gender, physical condition, etc., reflect the value of equity. The belief in equity is manifested in such statements as, "We believe that all citizens have the right to work as much as the employers have a need for them to work" (Heelan, 2000, p. 6).

These four social values both complement and conflict with one another as we shall see when we now look closely at some specific policy issues affecting community college: (1) remedial education, (2) K-16 initiatives, and (3) workforce preparation.

Remedial Education

The provision of remedial or developmental education at the college level results from the two social values of ***equity*** (access) and ***quality*** (excellence), two values that Rouche and Rouche (2000) remind us are often seen as "mutually exclusive" (p. 101). The policy decision at the state level to fund remedial education is the "solution" to the "social problem" of people lacking skills to do college-level work. Enabling them to attend college through funding remedial education reflects a state-level concern for ***equity***. State funding of remedial education also allows public institutions to maintain ***quality*** in their standards for educational outcomes.

Efficiency is another value that affects policy decisions about remediation. Among some states there is a movement to have community colleges be the sole providers of remedial education. For example, in Colorado only community colleges are funded for remedial education. If a four-year institution wants to offer remedial courses, that institution must

pay the full cost of the courses. However, in this situation the value of ***efficiency*** potentially conflicts with the value of ***choice*** in that a student's' right to choose to attend a four-year institution (rather than a two-year college) is hampered if the student needs remedial courses, because a four-year institution is less apt to offer these courses (Lovell, in press). Some also see this policy of restricting remedial education to the two-year sector as reflecting decisions to preserve the ***quality*** of four-year colleges. By requiring students who need remedial education to receive it before attending four-year schools, four-year institutions are thus reserved for "better" students (Twombly & Townsend, in press).

The value of ***quality*** may also be behind state policies that limit the number of times a student may take the same remedial course and receive financial aid. In Alabama, the limit is three times, after which the student must pay for the course him/herself.

At the institutional level, certain policy decisions about remedial education also occur. One decision is whether students assessed as needing remediation can opt out of these courses. Rouche and Rouche (2000) recommend that placement in remedial courses be required, not voluntary, (a policy motivated by the value of ***quality***) but some institutional administrators and faculty believe in a student's "right to fail and so do not make placement mandatory " (a policy motivated by the value of ***choice***)

Another decision regards the size of remedial classes. If community colleges are decreed as the only higher education institutions to offer remedial education, then the colleges will face increased enrollment in these courses. A concern for ***efficiency*** may prompt the decision to increase greatly the size of remedial courses, whereas a concern for ***quality*** would keep the classes small enough to permit individualization (Rouche & Rouche, 1999).

Concerns for both ***efficiency*** and ***quality*** are also seen in the recent consideration by some states of penalizing secondary schools whose graduates need remediation when they go to college. If secondary schools are faced with this possibility, there is a greater likelihood they will seek to collaborate with higher education in the preparation of students. Such collaboration is being stressed now in the recent emphasis on K-16 initiatives or efforts to link K-12 with higher education.

K-16 Initiatives

K-16 initiatives stem from the social need to increase the number of people attending college. The solution is K-16 initiatives that reflect the cultural values of ***efficiency*** and ***quality***.

When K-12 and higher education are closely linked, students can travel the educational path to the baccalaureate or associate degree more quickly or efficiently. The desire for ***efficiency*** in making this journey lies behind the development of dual credit programs. Defined here as programs that allows high students to take courses offered at their high school for college credit, dual credit programs can eliminate a semester or more from a

student's time in college. Some states such as Missouri have developed extensive dual-credit policies that spell out who can attend, how many courses can be taken, who should teach the courses, etc.

However, institutional concerns for ***quality*** may conflict with state-level concerns for ***efficiency.*** Since many high school students who take dual credit courses through one college decide to matriculate at another college, the receiving college may be concerned about the ***quality*** of the dual credit courses. Some four-year colleges refuse to accept dual credit courses or will only accept courses from certain institutions.

Another mechanism for facilitating K-16 educational movement is transfer and articulation policies. At the state level, transfer and articulation policies have been developed to facilitate transfer from two- to four-year colleges. Development of these policies reflects a concern for systemic ***efficiency.*** The policies also implicitly reflect beliefs about the ***quality*** of certain degrees and courses. As the policies make clear, not all associate degrees and not all courses are considered transfer-level (See Ignash and Townsend, in press, for a comprehensive look at current state-level transfer and articulation policies).

Although transfer is often thought of as occurring in just one direction—from the two-year to the four-year college, it occurs in several directions, including from the four-year to the two-year colleges. One group of transfer students receiving increasing attention these days is the group known as post-baccalaureate reverse transfers, those community college students who already have a baccalaureate degree or higher. Many are attending the two-year college to be better prepared as workers in their current field or to receive training in a new field. They are one part of the student groups seeking workforce preparation, our next policy issue.

Workforce Preparation

The social need to have sufficient workers adequately prepared for the workplace has resulted in the solution of federal and state legislation providing money for workforce preparation programs. Federal legislation has included the Job Training Partnership Act, the Carl Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, and the School to Work Opportunities Act. The legislation provides funding to institutions, including community colleges, that will develop and provide job training programs.

The most recent such legislation is the Workforce Investment Act, which allows for two-year colleges to be providers of workforce training, including adult education and literacy. The training focuses on moving people in welfare programs through short-term training designed to result in a job. The primary social value behind this act and others like it is ***efficiency*** or the desire to "reduce duplication and expenditures for operating workforce development programs and services" (New Federal Law Streamlines Adult Education, 1999, p. 34).

As much as state and federal workforce development legislation benefits two-year colleges financially, there is some risk that the legislation will indirectly lead to an undermining of the community college's transfer mission because of a preponderance of short-term training programs. For some, a declining emphasis on transfer is viewed as detrimental to institutional ***quality***.

At the institutional level, some policy issues about workforce preparation may develop. Remember the post-baccalaureate reverse transfers I mentioned earlier? In 1997 the AACC estimated that they constitute between 10 to 20% of total community college enrollment nationally. AACC's recent study of community college students found that post-baccalaureate reverse transfers were 28% of noncredit students nationally. Among credit students, they are about 3% of full-time students and 8% of part-time students (Phillippe & Valiga, 2000). At individual colleges, their enrollment may be from less than 1% to 25% or higher (Townsend & Dever, 1999).

These students have already received a baccalaureate degree and now seek enrollment in two-year colleges, sometimes for personal development but frequently for career development. Perhaps they seek to increase their skills in their current job, or they may seek to make a career change, whether a voluntary one or one necessitated by downsizing. Often they seek admission into programs that are selective in admissions, e.g., nursing, computer technology, engineering. In selective programs, the edge naturally goes to applicants with a proven record of academic success, in this case the baccalaureate. Admitting these students can enhance the ***quality*** of these programs. What becomes a policy issue is whether admission into these programs should be based purely on a prospective student's academic ability (as evidenced by past academic work) or whether admission should also reflect a concern for ***equity*** in distribution of opportunities. In other words, is it equitable to give spots in a selective program to those who already have a bachelor's degree if there are first-time college-goers who also want the spots (Phelan, 1999)? Of course, it could be argued that giving first priority in admissions to those who do not have a baccalaureate is not equitable either—at least to the baccalaureate-holders.

Conclusion

Knowing that the four social values of choice, quality, efficiency, and equity influence the development of educational policies and realizing that these values sometimes conflict will help community college leaders in several ways. First of all, they will be better understand why some policy decisions become lightning rods for controversy. A policy decision driven by concerns for equity will arouse much controversy if many others believe a different value, such as choice or efficiency, should have driven the decision. Also, sometimes leaders may have a negative, somewhat visceral, reaction to a particular policy but not really know why. Figuring out what social value has driven the formulation of the policy may help leaders realize that their negative reaction is to the social value, as exemplified in the particular policy. For example, if quality is one's primary value, then policies that seem to value efficiency at the expense of quality will be distasteful. Finally, assuming they are competent in understanding the social context in

which educational policies are made, community college leaders will be more thoughtful leaders if they think through the values implicit in certain policy decisions *before* setting the policy.

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